# RESISTANCE IS FERAL: DIGITAL CULTURE, COMMUNITY ARTS, AND THE NEW CULTURAL GATEKEEPERS

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**Abstract**

The Community Arts sector in Australia has a history of resistance. It has challenged hegemonic culture through facilitating grassroots creative production, contesting notions of artistic processes, and the role of the artist in society. This paper examines this penchant for resistance through the lens of contemporary digital culture, to establish that the sector is continuing to challenge dominant forms of cultural control. It then proposes that this enthusiasm and activity lacks ethical direction, describing it as feral to encompass the potential of current practices, while highlighting how a level of taming is needed in order to develop ethical approaches.

**Keywords:** community arts, cultural gatekeepers, network power, ethics, cultural resistance, software studies, network materiality, Australia

## Introduction

Community artists can be described as creative practitioners whose interest in nurturing creative expression among communities is, for many, motivated by a desire to redistribute power to the less empowered sections of society. They use creative learning techniques – described by Sefton-Green et al. [1] as "teaching for creativity" – to affect the economic and social development of individuals and community groups. The Australian community arts field is widely perceived as the state-funded nurturing of grassroots cultural practices: an avenue for social justice within governmental and institutional systems.

This paper draws on research findings that demonstrate that community artists' internet practices would benefit from increased awareness of the structures and dynamics of digital networks, in order to determine the emergent forms of cultural gatekeeping associated with digital culture. This idea is grounded in scholarly debates surrounding the relationship between human agency, and the agency inherent in network technology: the hardware and software that facilitates network activity.

This idea that technologies can operate as cultural gatekeepers has not been sufficiently dealt with by the community arts sector. Participatory media brings with it new barriers to creative expression, but what do we know about these new manifestations of cultural control? How are they affecting the most disenfranchised members of society (the target cohort of community artists)? Are they contributing to a new form of digital divide? This paper investigates these questions to help practitioners develop more nuanced understandings of resistance in the community arts context – specifically the interplay of human and non-human agency that turns network participation in to culture.

This paper suggests that the community arts sector should move beyond its "marveling at the phenomenon of user-created content" [2], to advocate for practitioners to investigate the ways socio-technical actors are shaping the norms and logics of internet participation, and how these forces are shaping culture. It maintains this position to help community artists continue the role of facilitating cultural resistance at the grassroots.

## The Community Art of Cultural Resistance

The rationales associated with community arts and cultural development policy and practice in Australia have periodically been questioned and built upon since the field became a funding category of the Australia Council for the Arts in the early 1970s. These changes have taken place alongside significant moments of transition that have occurred in the broader cultural and technological landscape. These turning points include the influence of mass media on the formation of culture, shifting government policy, multiculturalism, the proliferation of personal computers and low-cost media production hardware, and the internet. These moments have contributed to reconfigurations of the field, exemplified by multiple name changes, policy shifts and the introduction of new practices. Regardless of these reconfigurations, the community arts field has persisted with its agenda of resisting dominant forms of cultural control, earning it a reputation of being a sector that is "hard to kill" [3].

Having established that the sector is still alive in Australia, this paper turns its attention to the reconfiguration of practices due to the bedding down of digital participatory culture. We are seeing this participatory paradigm changing the state of play in the sector, because the potential for disenfranchised people to participate as producers and promoters of culture has increased exponentially with the rise of social media networks. The dismantling of traditional cultural gatekeeping due to participatory forms of media has been a boon for community arts practice, a scenario that would have been difficult to predict in 1992 when cultural theorist Gay Hawkins posed the question "Is community arts a cultural programme whose time has passed?" [4]. Where once the sector attempted to counter the formation of cultural consciousness through television, radio and newspapers, to "retrieve the vernacular in the face of powerful and centralized forces" [5], now community artists are nurturing creative expression among participants who are able to self-publish, using digital platforms that are inexpensive or free and that have the potential to reach a global audience.

This rise of globally distributed "vernacular creativity" [6] has led to new forms of cultural resistance being devised by some community artists. Australian community arts organization CuriousWorks have developed a model they call their Cultural Leaders Program, which is based on the idea of 'training the trainer'. Interested and able participants of CuriousWorks' community arts programs are encouraged to learn professional media-making skills and the ethical foundations of socially engaged arts practice. The program implies that these cultural leaders will continue to produce engaging cultural messages that appeal to audiences beyond their own communities. CuriousWorks' rationale for this approach is to help people become the translators and disseminators of alternative narratives: stories rarely transmitted by mainstream media channels. This construction of alternative messages challenges the implicit social values and political interests permeating mass communication networks, a phenomenon Castells has theorized as "reprogramming networks" [7].

When we begin to critique the software services relied upon by community artists for distributed cultural production, we see that participatory platforms are shaping these new forms of cultural resistance. A point of departure for thinking about these emergent forces is the idea that technologies have agency, that they are actors [8]. Together with human agents – such as software engineers and corporate social media executives – technologies are increasingly, actively, mediating culture. This paper therefore advocates for new approaches to be developed that help community artists identify emergent ideologies and power

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dynamics associated with participatory networks.

## Network Materiality and Identifying Cultural Gatekeepers

This paper is positioned among discourses of material politics that are grounded in Internet Studies and Software Studies. This evaluation of relevant scholarly work is necessary to establish one of the central arguments of this paper: that network materiality must be considered in order for emergent cultural gatekeepers to be identified so that cultural resistance can be maintained through the design of appropriate technology. This idea is informed by an awareness of how the structures and dynamics of internet technology influence many aspects of our networked actions.

From network elements such as the wireless spectrum, to algorithms that make connections between people and companies on our behalf, there is an increasing need for community artists to engage with the materiality of an internet that is constantly, and not overly visibly, changing. The acknowledgement of networks as material encourages community artists to anticipate the potentiality of networks to form a richer view of what constitutes both cultural resistance, and appropriate technology, in the networked moment. It is also proposed to counter effusive rhetoric surrounding networked platforms and acts of participation within such networks.

In *Software Studies* [9], Manovich poignantly contextualizes software as an emergent power paradigm by casting our minds back to the 1990s, when the most powerful multinational corporations were those who produced and processed goods – shoes, burgers, and cola – attached to successful global marketing and branding strategies. He contrasts this with data from 2007 that positions Google as the most recognized brand in the world, before casting Apple, Amazon, Facebook, and Ebay, as "culture software" that carry "atoms of culture" in the form of media, information, and human interactions. This idea is further explored by Galloway and Thacker who describe how the process of globalization has "mutated from a system of control housed in a relatively small number of power hubs to a system of control infused in to the material fabric of distributed networks" [10]. Manovich suggested that software was invisible to most academics and artists interested in the social effects of ICTs (with the exception of the open source movement). He proposed that elevating software in discussions about the "network society" and "social media" was crucial to ensure the causes of societal changes are dealt with as thoroughly as the effects.

This paper's call for an engagement with the materiality of networks is partly responsive to the community arts sector's increasing use – some may consider dependence – on freely available proprietary software and network services. These services are not "merely facilitating networking activities"; rather, they offer users a particular construction of connectivity and participation [11], where algorithms mediating participatory platforms have "the power to enable and assign meaningfulness, managing how information is perceived by users" [12]. Free platforms capture, process, and archive both quantitative and qualitative information, and furthermore, they become the "curators of public discourse" [13]. The corporate entities that set the agendas for these social platforms "trade in the rhetoric of networked utopia" to develop the "necessary apparatuses of an idealised peer-to-peer economy" [14].

Trend [15] describes the efforts of these platforms to help citizens enhance communication as prompting an "endless cycle of hope and disappointment". Confusion over social norms, and identity performance, are blended with shifting defaults, policies, and politics surrounding privacy and 'opting out'. Often these functions "operate at a level that is anonymous" or invisible, which "makes them difficult to grasp" [16]. Most of the software functions, even if they were visible, would be inaccessible to most people: "few are equipped to understand it with fluency, and even fewer can reverse engineer object code to arrive at the higher-level languages with which it correlates" [17].

The invisible dynamics of software code create unequal patterns of distribution, revealing networks as ideal machines for control [18]. This concept manifests in the idea that with the emergence of defacto web standards, certain solutions are elevated over others, "threatening the elimination of alternative solutions to the same problem" [19]. When this idea is viewed through the lens of Barzilai-Nahon's [20] *Theory of Network Gatekeeping*, new forms of cultural control are revealed. If the process of "eliminating alternatives" is a byproduct of emerging global standards, then the promise of global cooperation resulting in cultural diversity requires deeper investigation.

The emergent nature of current sociotechnical change sees our literacy capacities challenged with every software upgrade, interface change, and networked social interaction. This has led to scholarly debates concerned with notions of a digital divide having moved beyond a focus on *access* to the internet towards discussions of *digital fluency*. Definitions of this term vary covering ideas such as critical information-seeking [21], knowing how to make "things of significance" with technology [22], and the idea that human agency is a central factor of digital fluency, as argued by Papacharissi and Easton [23]. Issues surrounding access have been overshadowed partly due to what DiMaggio et al [24] call the "differentiation principle" – when products and services become available to a broad section of society, the relatively privileged begin to create new systems that re-establish hierarchies. So as access to the internet increases, the social momentum of differentiation has the potential to create new kinds of inequality. This paper aligns itself with Papacharissi and Easton's conception of digital fluency, because their focus on human agency as a root issue more adequately deals with the idea that new manifestations of a digital divide are emerging – those caused by the manufacture of new systems of inclusion and exclusion.

Although community arts organisations like CuriousWorks promote the internet as an unprecedented platform for the distribution of diverse cultural messages, they also recognize that digital networks are challenging established notions of human agency and cultural capital, and the means by which they are nurtured through community arts. The company's director Shakthi Sivanathan, sees these changes as having a broad effect beyond the community arts sector: "Whilst radio took 50 years and television 20 years to reach an audience of 20 million, it took Facebook two years. The internet is still a baby – but like Godzilla, one that is making terrifying strides in its early years: spam, Wikileaks, Justin Beiber, SMS bullying, Egypt, LOLcats, Skyping an overseas family member, getting fired on FaceBook. It feels like digital technology has a hold on us; not the other way around" [25].

With this in mind, this paper does not propose that community artists become

systems administrators or dedicate their weekends to learning code. Rather, it suggests that having a critical view of the interplay between human and technological agents will help reveal the emergent forces shaping and gatekeeping digital culture. I offer this proposal in response to the idea that cultural resistance in the community arts field is *feral*. The word feral aims to capture the excitement of current practices, and the potential of future practices; but also implies that some taming of current practices is necessary, where taming describes the cultivation of critical practices that reveal the material nature of digital communications networks.

## Conclusion

As cultural authorship is permanently contested territory, the critical position of Australian community arts continues to involve a pushing back against hegemonic cultural messages. However, for the sector to maintain cultural resistance in the internet era, it must identify new paradigms of inclusion and exclusion. In order to evaluate the socio-technical forces influencing the logics and norms of participatory platforms, community artists might consider the materiality of networks, as a way of revealing the associated politics and potentialities of the internet. This method is proposed to help the sector develop a more nuanced understanding of cultural resistance in the context of digital culture.

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